

The eyes of the world are upon...

After multiple artillery attacks on Kabul, the Taliban faction seized the capital on Sept. 27, 1996 and displaced the ruling members of the Afghan government. President Rabbani fled and continued to rule the northern third of the country with the remainder of his cabinet. From there, anti-Taliban forces fought to regain control over the country. By early 1997, however, the Taliban had gained control of approximately 90 percent of the state. The name of the country was officially changed to the Islamic State of Afghanistan, and the flag was also changed. The Taliban steadily consolidated control over Afghanistan throughout 1998 and early 1999. In March 1999, Taliban forces captured the Dara-e-Soof area in the northern province of Samangon from opposition forces led by Ahmad Shah Masoud.

February 1999 negotiations between the Taliban and opposition forces were unsuccessful. From March 11-14, 1999, Maulvi Wakil Ahmed Mutawakkil of the Taliban and Muhammad Younus Qanooni of the northern opposition met in Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan. There, they reached an agreement to exchange prisoners of war and to continue cease-fire negotiations in April. Most importantly, they also agreed to establish a coalition government representing all sides. In early April 1999, however, the Taliban announced that they would not continue the peace talks.

Although the Taliban maintain control over approximately 90 percent of Afghani territory, on April 21, 1999, the Taliban suffered a setback. After intense fighting, they were forced to abandon the city of Bamiyan to Unification Party forces, members of the Northern Alliance loyal to President Rabbani. In mid-May, the Taliban retook Bamiyan. The former Afghan Islamic Government (AIG) accused the Taliban of the massacre of hundreds of civilians and the burning of more than 200 houses belonging to Shiite Muslims. The Taliban denied the allegations. In late May, the Taliban seized thousands of weapons from residents of Bamiyan. Fighting continued throughout May in the Samangan and Balkh provinces.

In June, the former Afghan Islamic Government (AIG) revealed that they had been investigating collaboration between its commanders and the Taliban. Officers were removed prior to an attack by the Taliban, which with the help of the commanding AIG officer, would have resulted in significant gains by the Taliban.

Meanwhile, neighboring countries and international organizations were appealing to both sides of the conflict to reconcile their differences non-violently. The Six plus Two Group, consisting of neighboring countries Pakistan, Tajikistan, Iran, China, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and the United States and Russia, convened in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in late July to have a meeting with Taliban leaders and the former government of Afghanistan in an effort to reach a settlement. The Tashkent Declaration stated that there is no military solution to the conflict and called for an immediate ceasefire and negotiations. In addition, all roads were to be opened, prisoners exchanged, and humanitarian aid disbursed. All members of the Six plus Two Group, excluding Turkmenistan, signed the Tashkent Declaration.

Despite the agreements made at Tashkent, the Taliban immediately thereafter launched the biggest offensive of the year. Taliban forces moved north from Kabul in a three-pronged attack into Tagab, Bagram and Koh-e-suf. The forces were able to seize the capital of Parwan province and move into the Panjsher Valley. The opposition lost a key air base in Bagram. Heavy fighting continued into August and resulted in thousands of civilians fleeing into Tajikistan and Pakistan. In early August, the opposition was able to make a recovery by taking back Charikar only a few days after it was lost, and then moved within 50 km of Kabul. Refugees from the region bolstered the opposition's forces, and were believed to be a significant

contributing factor to these advances. In August, it was revealed that “madrasas” (Islamic seminaries) had been closed in the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan in order to allow the students to fight along with Taliban forces. Meanwhile, the Taliban began sweeping through the capital and arresting dissidents. The Taliban pushed further in September securing the Shomali plain and moving toward Taloqan in an effort to cut supply links to Tajikistan.

As 2000 began, the civil war in Afghanistan continues unabated and without a real solution in sight. The Taliban reportedly control 90 percent of the country’s territory, but due to the significant interests of some of Afghanistan’s neighbors in limiting the spread of fundamentalist Islam in Central Asia, the opposition continued to receive considerable military, economic and political support.

The year 2000 turned out to be a year of mixed fortunes for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Politically, the regime made rapid progress in gaining tacit approval from governments across the world. Representatives of the Taliban were received by major governments all over the world and the Taliban also managed to open liaison offices in key capitals across the world—the first time that it has been able to break out of the international diplomatic doghouse that the regime had found itself in since 1997 when it first took control of Kabul and the government in Afghanistan. Key Taliban officials, notably the foreign minister Wakil Mutawakil, made a series of visits to Europe in 2000 in an attempt to convince the European governments of the need to lift the sanctions imposed by the United Nations in 1999.

But it was not all the way up for the Taliban in the year 2000. The confrontation, between United States and the Taliban on the one hand and between Russia and the Taliban on the other, took more serious colors as the world’s two biggest powers blamed Taliban for supporting acts of terrorism and harboring terrorists and pushed the United Nations to impose additional sanctions against the regime.

The United States has been asking Taliban to hand over Saudi Arabian businessman Osama bin Laden, who is blamed by the U.S. for the deadly bombings carried out in Kenya and Tanzania in the August 1998, claiming over 300 lives. Bin Laden has been living in Afghanistan for the last five years under the shelter and protection of the Taliban, who have so far refused to turn him over to the U.S. saying that the U.S. had not been able to provide evidence for his involvement in the bombings. The dispute between the U.S. and the Taliban on this issue has already seen several heated moments, especially in 1998 itself when U.S. aircraft bombed positions in Afghanistan where bin Laden was supposed to be in hiding.

Russia, on the other hand, has alleged that the Taliban has been supporting the Islamic rebels in its troubled republic of Chechnya where the Russian army has been fighting a battle with separatists for the last three years. Russia says several of the Chechen fighters are trained and armed in Afghanistan and that a number of mercenaries, from various Islamic countries all over the world, have also been trained in Afghanistan and later dispatched to fight the Russian soldiers in Chechnya. Russia says that the Taliban government has been tacitly approving such training camps in its territory and has failed to take adequate measures to curb these activities. Once again, Taliban denies that it is involved in the Chechen affair in any way.

After having hoped for some action from the Taliban on their concerns, the two largest powers in the world finally turned to the United Nations to “punish” the Taliban. They introduced a resolution in the U.N. Security Council calling for further sanctions against the Taliban regime. The resolution called for an arms embargo against the Taliban, closure of Taliban offices outside Afghanistan, freezing of Taliban assets outside the country and ban on Taliban officials’ travels abroad, besides tightening the ban on international flights to Afghanistan. The resolution was heatedly discussed in the U.N. Security Council where some countries, notably France, were hesitant to agree to fresh sanctions on the Taliban. France maintained that sanctions would only hurt the common people of Afghanistan while not working at all on the Taliban.

However, the French were accused of defending their commercial interests by opposing sanctions. It was alleged that France is believed to be actively looking at tapping the massive oil resources of the Central Asian region and wants to use Afghanistan's territory for building a pipeline to bring the oil and gas from the region to the huge, energy-deficient markets in the South Asian region. Finally, France too voted in favor of imposing fresh sanctions, which included a ban on arms sale to the Taliban. Pakistan, the strongest supporter of Taliban, also objected to the sanctions. The Pakistani army is believed to be involved in training and arming the Taliban. Pakistan said that further sanctions could scuttle any peace efforts and also further isolate and insulate the Taliban. China, a permanent member of the Security Council and a strong ally of Pakistan, abstained from the vote, along with Malaysia.

Outside the United Nations, countries neighboring Afghanistan, especially the newly independent states in Central Asia, were closely watching the developments in the see-saw battle in northern Afghanistan. The Newly Independent States of the region have expressed fears of destabilization due to the support allegedly furnished by the Taliban to extremists elements in these countries. And as Taliban made gains in the northern part of Afghanistan, bordering these states, alarm bells began to sound in several capitals in the region. Afghanistan's neighbors expressed fears that the battle could spill over into Tajikistan, the small state bordering Afghanistan in the north. The region was hit hard in the summer of 2000 when an Islamic group, trained, armed and based in Afghanistan, attacked government forces in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The attacks, apparently launched from Tajikistan, were aimed at creating an independent Islamic state in the Ferghana Valley that passes through the three countries. Kazakhstan, the biggest of the countries in the region, accused the Taliban of funding terrorism and drug trafficking in order to spread Islamic extremism throughout the region.

Meanwhile, Russia and India formed a joint working group on Taliban. Both the countries face serious problems due to Islamic militants. Quite like Russia, India, too, has seen mercenaries from Afghanistan infiltrate into the troubled state of Jammu and Kashmir and launch a "jihad" against the government. The working group is supposed to look at ways of containing the Taliban and its influence on the militants. The group was formed during the visit of the Russian President Vladimir Putin to India in October 2000.

Russia has said that it would like to see India associated more closely with the efforts to contain Taliban. Russia is already working closely with the Central Asian Republics like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Russia has placed nearly 20,000 of its troops on the northern borders of Afghanistan in order to prevent infiltration by Islamic militants from Afghanistan into the Central Asian countries. On the western front, Iran has placed nearly 50,000 troops on its border with Afghanistan as a gesture of support for the Afghan opposition and also for putting military pressure on the Taliban. China, too, has been taking an active interest in the situation due to the trouble in its own Muslim-dominated Xinxiang-Ughuir autonomous region bordering Afghanistan in the east. China is also keen to ensure that the Taliban-inspired and aided militants operating in its territory are contained.

On the battlefield, Taliban began the summer of 2000 on a strong note. Summer also marks the beginning of the fighting season once the snows start to melt in the high reaches of the mountains. Taliban, which has been in control of nearly 90 percent of the Afghan territory for the last several years, has been battling hard with the opposition troops led by the President Burhanuddin Rabbani for seizing control over the rest of the territory, especially the famous Panjsher Valley. The summer of 2000 saw one of the most fierce battles in the recent years and the international community watched nervously as the Taliban managed to stage rapid gains on the battlefield in the first few weeks.

The Taliban managed to win control over the strategic Takhar gorge in northeastern Afghanistan and followed this crucial victory up with the conquest of Taloqan town, the biggest and most serious defeat for the Northern Alliance, the umbrella grouping of anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan, since the fall of Kabul to Taliban four years ago. The Taliban attempted to continue

their momentum by attacking the critical Panjsher Valley, literally the last stronghold of the opposition forces. However, the opposition, led by Ahmed Shah Masood, were able to beat off the Taliban attack and hold on to their strongest position in the country.

But the opposition was seriously worried about the reverses it had suffered on the battlefield. Masood blamed the fall of Taloqan and Takhar gorge on betrayal by the Gulbuddin Hekmatyar faction of the alliance and also due to the role played by Pakistan in the latest Taliban offensive. Pakistan is known to be the strongest supporter of the Taliban and is reported to supply them not only with political support but also military leadership and supplies. The U.S. State Department officials have often accused Pakistani army of being involved in the Taliban operations, with its officials fighting alongside the Taliban.

The defeats seemed to bring the opposition together and led to extensive consultations on their future strategy to counter the gains of Taliban. Masood held meetings with Uzbek warlord and another opponent of the Taliban, Abdul Rashid Dostum, and Ismail Khan and Maulvi Atta Muhammad in the Iranian city of Mashad in October 2000 to discuss the situation in the parts of Afghanistan controlled by Taliban.

The consolidation of the opposition forces enabled them to launch attacks on the Taliban, opening new fronts against them and managing to wrest control of key towns from the Taliban. Besides the northeastern parts of the country, the opposition forces launched attacks on the Taliban in central Afghanistan as well. In intense fighting in the Bamiyan province in central Afghanistan, the opposition was able to capture the strategic town of Yakawlang in late December 2000. The opposition followed its victory with yet another crucial, morale-boosting win in the neighboring Ghor district, capturing another key town, Ghalmin, about 350 km northwest of Kabul by Dec. 31, 2000. Opposition leaders say they have opened a new front in the battle against Taliban and say more fighting could be seen in the region. The victories are significant since Bamiyan province was captured by the Taliban in 1995 and Ghor province in 1998 and since then the region has been totally under their control. And if the opposition is able to consolidate its gains in the region, it could prove a major setback to the Taliban.

The opposition victories are also significant since they are believed to have received a significant amount of tactical and military help from Russia and other countries in the region. The re-arming of the opposition took place at a feverish pace following the serious defeats handed to the opposition by the Taliban earlier in the summer of 2000. The opposition says that it also sees an opportunity in its recent victories since people in southern, western and Southwestern provinces of Afghanistan were reportedly getting restless with the Taliban regime.

As usual, the civilian population bore the brunt of the battle. Afghanistan has been facing severe droughts due to lack of rains for the last three years. The conditions became especially severe in the summer of 2000 as local production fell 44 percent to 1.82 million tons, leaving the country dependent on foreign aid for the balance 1.5 million tons. The United Nations issued warnings that thousands of lives were at risk unless the international community acted quickly to send in relief supplies. The U.N. estimated that aid worth over \$60 million was needed urgently to prevent famine in the country. The World Food Programme, along with several international non-governmental organizations, set up camps in various parts of the country to ensure that food was distributed even in the remote mountainous parts. The U.N. also cautioned that there was a severe lack of seed in the northern parts of the country, which could lead to a long-term food deficit of serious proportions, if the situation was not remedied immediately. The U.N. estimated that there was a shortfall of 40,000 tons of seeds, nearly 25 percent of the total annual consumption and demanded \$5 million for buying the seeds.

And the renewed fighting added to the misery of the local population as thousands fled the area affected by the battle and sought shelter elsewhere. Nearly 10,000 people had fled from the northern province of Baghlan itself, while over 50,000 fled from Takhar and Badakhshan provinces earlier in the summer when fighting was intense in those parts of the country.

But it was not all a downhill ride for Afghanistan. The U.N. also managed to get a breakthrough in getting the Taliban and the combined opposition to agree to peace negotiations. In November 2000, the United Nations special envoy for Afghanistan, Francesco Vendrell, sent feelers to all the parties about holding indirect peace talks. As both the Taliban and the opposition showed readiness to talk, the first round of peace talks was held in the Turkmen capital Ashgabat on Dec. 11, the first peace moves in the troubled country for the last couple of years. The talks, which eventually turned out to be direct, face-to-face talks between the warring factions, lasted three hours and focused on the need to set up a coalition government. They also discussed possibilities of a long-term ceasefire before establishing the preconditions for forming an administrative arrangement in the country.

The two sides agreed to meet again. However, Taliban warned that if the United Nations imposed additional sanctions, then it would not participate in any peace initiative by the United Nations. In February 2001, the Taliban leader Omar Mohammed ordered the destruction of all statues that exist in the country, saying that since the statues were religious, they were anti-Islamic. The Taliban identified two gigantic statues of Buddha in the central Afghan town of Bamiyan as its first targets. The statues, measuring 55 m and 38 m in height, dated from the Mauryan period in India in third century C.E. Despite appeals by the international community, including the United Nations and the UNESCO, the Taliban soldiers bombarded the statues with anti-tank fire for almost a week, reducing this rich piece of the country's cultural heritage to rubble.

Written by CountryWatch.com. Sources: The Afghan Times, Afghan News, rediff.com; IDSA, New Delhi. For additional sources see Appendix B of this review.

Osama bin Laden is the world's most wanted terrorist. According to the U.S. State Department, his goal is to ignite a war between Islam and the West.

Born in 1957, the multi-billionaire Saudi citizen goes by several nicknames: "the prince," "the emir," "Abu Abdallah," "Mujahid Sheikh," "Hajj," (the pilgrim) and "the director."

He is the youngest son of a wealthy Saudi Arabian businessman, and has enormous economic resources at his disposal.

Bin Laden started his military career in the 1980s by building a multinational organization recruiting Muslims to fight against Soviet forces, which had invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia in 1998, but was thrown out of his native country after allegedly having supported terrorist groups.

The tall and skinny bin Laden then moved to Sudan, but was expelled after an attempt on the life of the Egyptian President Housni Mubarak. Evidence, the government reported, pointed to the involvement of bin Laden as well as support from the Islamic Sudanese authorities. Bin Laden still has important business interests in Sudan. In addition to Sudan, the fundamentalist Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, which for some time have hosted bin Laden as their guest, are possible targets of American revenge after the U.S. terrorist attacks on September 11.

Anti-American feelings are strong in the Arab and Muslim world. During the latest Palestinian *intifada*, America has taken a stauncher pro-Israeli stand, and have become increasingly unpopular in the Middle East. Several million Islamic fundamentalists worship bin Laden as a hero and savior that dare to stand up to what they perceive as unacceptable American military presence in the region, in particular in Saudi Arabia, which is home to the Muslim holy sites of Mecca and Medina. The fact the U.S. has pointed bin Laden out as one of its main enemies has only made him more popular.

Bin Laden tops the list of the FBI ten most wanted people. In 1996 he issued a declaration of "war against America." In August 1998, terrorists with connections to bin Laden bombed the American embassies of Kenya and Tanzania. Earlier that spring, American intelligence service was planning to kidnap the terrorist leader and prosecute him in the U.S. Already back in 1996, President Clinton had approved actions that could lead to bin Laden's death. The suicide attack on the USS Cole in Yemen in October 2000 has also revealed links to bin Laden's organization. Despite the \$5 million reward promised by the CIA and the FBI for anyone that would lead to his arrest, American authorities have so far been nowhere near catching him. Only three weeks ago,

bin Laden warned in an interview with the London-based *al-Quds al-Arabi* newspaper that a large-scale attack on U.S. interests in retaliation for U.S. support for Israel, was imminent.

Links to more information:

FBI's assessment of the terror threat against the U.S.:

<http://www.fbi.gov/congress/congress01/freeh051001.htm>

Wanted: bin Laden <http://www.fbi.gov/mostwant/topten/fugitives/laden.htm>

U.S. State Department fact sheet on bin Laden:

http://www.state.gov/www/regions/africa/fs_bin_ladin.html

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